1-1-1996

African Americans and the Bible

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an area used to distinguish the border between the tribal inheritance of Benjamin and that of Judah (Josh. 15:7). Following that border constituted the shortest way to go down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and then on to Transjordan.

adversary, in the OT, anyone (or anything) standing in the way of the completion of God's will or opposing God's people either collectively or individually (e.g., 2 Sam. 19:22; 1 Kings 5:4; 11:25; Ezra 4:1). "Adversary" is the literal meaning of the Hebrew word *satan,* and the idea eventually developed that Satan was *the* adversary (see Job 1:6–2:7). In certain NT passages, the term is also used with this connotation (e.g., 1 Pet. 5:8; cf. 1 Tim. 5:14–15). ***See also*** Devil; Satan.

Advocate. ***See*** Paraclete.

Aeneas (i-nee´uhs), a paralytic at Lydda, otherwise unknown, who was healed by Peter (Acts 9:33–35).

Aenon (ee´nuhn), a well-watered site, the scene of baptism by John the Baptist, in the vicinity of Salim (John 3:23). The exact location is nnknown. A fourth-century reference by Eusebius situated Aenon in the Beth-shean valley, some six miles south of Beth-shean. A mosaic floor map discovered in a sixth-century church in Madeba, Jordan, represents Aenon on the eastern side of the Jordan River. Recent speculation places it near Nablus, not far from the abundant water of Wadi Far'-ah.

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Rationale for a History of "Readings": The history of the engagement of the Bible among African Americans is dramatic and complex and has important implications for biblical interpretation. It provides the student of the Bible not only a conceptual window onto a dramatic and complex history of self-definitions and worldviews among those in the modern world who now call themselves African Americans, but also the opportunity to rethink the basic hermeneutical assumptions about biblical interpretation, especially its focus upon the ancient text and/or ancient historical situation as the starting and end point of interpretation. The critical juxtaposition of the Bible and African Americans can provoke thinking about whether the interpretive agenda can or should be focused around text as opposed to "world."

A historical approach to African Americans' readings of the Bible is important in order to gain perspective not only on the internal changes, diversity, and process of differentiation, but also on the relationship between interpretation and culture.

Visions of Freedom in Slaveholding "Christian" America: The earliest large-scale cultural encounter of African Americans with the Bible can be traced back to the late eighteenth century, as presupposed by the formation of independent visible and "invisible" congregations in the North and South and as evidenced in different cultural interpretive expressions (slave songs, poetry, sermons, journals). Finding themselves enslaved by those who seemed to find in the Bible a source of power, the Africans in the "new world" embraced the Bible for themselves as a source of psychic-spiritual emotional freedom, power, and hope, as inspiration for learning, and as a language of veiled criticism. Both the dramatic narratives of the OT, especially the Exodus story and the moral and sociopolitical excoriations of the prophets, and the display of the miraculous powers of Jesus and his ultimate vindication in the NT captured the collective popular imagination of the enslaved Africans from the beginning of their encounter with the Bible.

Thus, in the initial hearings of the stories of the Bible, African Americans essentially transformed the Bible from the book of slaveholders and of slaveholding religion into the book of the world and religion of slaves. It was thereby engaged as a window onto another world, a language world full of personalities and drama with which the slaves could identify. The hearing and reading of dramatic biblical stories about times and exploits long ago in faraway lands seemed arresting. Such engagement provided not only occasional spiritual respite from the harshness of slavery, but also a powerful rhetorical and conceptual repertoire for the rhetorics and visions of resistance as well as the positive constructions of the (African American) religious self.

Prophetic Reading of Bible and America: The Bible continued to serve multiple functions among African Americans through the end of the period of slavery, the decades of reconstruction and Jim Crowism, and into the civil rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s. From the founding of the independent churches and denominations in the late eighteenth century to the clamor against segregation in the mid-twentieth century, a great number of African Americans saw in the Bible the language and concepts of social and prophetic critique, a blueprint for racial uplift, social integration, political peace, and economic advancement. A few leaders suggested more radical Pan-Africanist views, citing biblical injunctions for black separatism, including a back-to-Africa program. Yet for the majority, the Bible was the primary blueprint for a type of integrationist social reform. The biblical principle of the universal kinship of all humanity under the sovereignty of God was embraced by the majority of African Americans as mandate for social integration and political equality and as a critique of the America that claimed to be God-fearing. NT passages illustrative of the principle (Gal. 3:26–28; Acts 2; 10:34–36) were often quoted, paraphrased, or alluded to in orations and sermons and tracts.

Yet this reading of both the Bible and American culture is "canonical": it generally respects the dominant traditional (white Protestant) parameters of principles of interpretation, as well as the range of texts considered worthy of consideration. Biblical images and teachings provided the ideological foundations for the founding of separate African American churches and other institutions. Yet these separate institutions do not represent comprehensive alternative pedagogies, philosophies, or politics. They represent a mixture of both accommodationist and integrationist interests and limited (racialist) social critique.

Radical Readings and Orientations of the Marginalized: The growth and dominance of the religion-inspired separate but accommodationist African American institutions and theologies of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries notwithstanding, these institutions could not and did not embrace or reflect the sensibilities of every individual or community. A very different "reading" of America and of the Bible among African Americans was in evidence by the early decades of the twentieth century in major urban areas in the United States. This "reading" is critical of the dominant (white) American culture, both its "secular" and its religious aspects, including the dominant African American religious and cultural orientations.

No single group can be identified here; there are a number of groups—the Garvey Movement, Nation of Islam, Father Divine and the Peace Mission Movement, the Black Jews, Spiritual Churches, among other so-called sects and cults—that were without formal ties among themselves, yet had common sensibilities and rhythms and a shared critique of the dominant world and the African American "mainline" orientations.

The critique is registered in different ways by different groups. One of the most dramatic critiques is seen in the reading of the Bible, accepted as Holy Scripture by most whites and African Americans, through principles of interpretation not legitimized by dominant communities (e.g., in the Spiritual Churches). It is also registered through rejection of the canon respected by "mainline" communities and the embracing of "esoteric" sacred texts (e.g., by the Black Jews).

Women's Readings: The readings of women are in evidence throughout the history of African American engagement of the Bible—from Phyllis Wheatley to Maria Stewart and Jarena Lee and their countless unnamed counterparts to late twentieth-century critical "womanist" interpreters. Although women's readings of the Bible are a constitutive part of each cultural reading outlined above, to each reading women bring special nuances or intensity, especially with regard to the articulation of exclusion and suffering or its opposite, inclusion and joy.

Implications for Biblical Interpretation: Precisely because of the African beginnings and history in the United States and because of the role of the Bible in the construction of the dominant American cultural self-definition, an understanding of the history of African Americans' engagement of the Bible is most important for an understanding of American (popular and academic) biblical interpretation. It dramatically exposes biblical interpretation—popular, religious, and academic—as cultural encodings and significations, with its different cultural prejudices, dramatic silences, exaggerations, underplayings, and obfuscations.

Such a history implies the need for consideration of a change in interpretive agenda and paradigms. An altogether different hermeneutical paradigm, with ancient texts being neither the starting nor end point, but a part of a complex interfacing of the interpretation of self and culture and the interpretation of ancient texts, is suggestive and provocative. ***See also*** Bible; Biblical Criticism; Canon; Feminist Hermeneutics; Hermeneutics; Liberation Theology, Hermeneutics of.

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Agabus (ag´uh-buhs), a Christian prophet from Jerusalem who, in Antioch, predicted a widespread famine during the reign of the emperor Claudius (Acts 11:27–28); later, at Caesarea, he foresaw Paul's arrest in Jerusalem and subsequent imprisonment by the Gentiles (Acts 21:10–11). ***See also*** Prophet.

Agag (ay´gag), the name (or perhaps the royal title) of the king of the Amalekites whom Saul defeated but spared, contrary to divine command. After rebuking Saul bitterly, Samuel hewed Agag to pieces in Gilgal "before the Lord" (1 Sam. 15).

Agagite (ay´guh-*git*), the ancestry of Haman and his father, Hammedatha, as identified in the book of Esther (3:1, 10; 8:3, 5; 9:24). The usual reference has been to descendants of Agag, an Amalekite king defeated by Saul (1 Sam. 15:7–9). This is consistent with the role